

Testimony for Public Hearing  
Senate Committee on Families, Seniors, and Human Services  
April 22, 2015

The Rev. Nicolette L. Siragusa  
1274 Burlington Dr.  
Grand Ledge, MI 48837

Re: House Bills 4188, 4189, and 4190

Good afternoon, my name is Rev. Nicolette Siragusa. I serve as the pastor of First Congregational United Church of Christ in Grand Ledge and I urge you to oppose House Bills 4188, 4189, and 4190.

As a pastor, part of my work is to help people live out the values they profess — values that include nurturing our children, protecting vulnerable populations, and encouraging stable families. The Judeo-Christian scriptures instruct us to care for the orphan, and in this time and place we expand that understanding to include children in the foster care system or who are awaiting permanent homes.

I am thankful for foster care agencies and families who have the daunting task of caring for 14,000 of our state's most vulnerable children. When children are removed from their families because of abuse or neglect, the state has the responsibility to place them with foster or adoptive families who best meet their needs. The bills before you, however, put the religious beliefs of placement agencies above the best interest of the children in their care.

Under these proposed bills, even fit parents with good, loving, and stable homes, who meet the criteria agreed and adhered to by all placement agencies receiving taxpayer dollars, could be turned away based on additional arbitrary criteria that an agency calls a 'sincerely held' belief. As a Christian minister, I am thankful for religious liberty and for the wide variety of religious groups that include social welfare as a part of their activities. James 1:27 says in part, "religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress." Still, faith based agencies that accept public funds to help provide that care should be held to the same standards as non-faith based agencies.

It is unconscionable to set up barriers that will deny or delay children being placed in available, stable, permanent, loving homes. It is reprehensible to allow agencies to turn away potential parents for reasons having nothing to do with their ability to care for children. Instead of cultivating stable environments in which children may grow and thrive, we are spending valuable time debating a bill designed to protect agencies that wish to discriminate.

Thirty years ago, Michigan expanded the celebration of the national Week of the Young Child and declared April the Month of the Young Child. As a part of this year's proclamation, Governor Snyder stated, 'as parents, teachers, lawmakers and community leaders, it is our collective responsibility to ensure special care and attention is given to young children so that they grow and mature into loving, capable, considerate, and productive adults.' Every month, but especially in April, we are invited to take seriously our commitment to caring for children. Thus, I urge you to put children's needs first by opposing House Bills 4188, 4189, and 4190.